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FM AMEMBASSY COLOMBO
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 6323
INFO RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA PRIORITY 0227
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD PRIORITY 7208
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU PRIORITY 5315
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 3852
RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY 1116
RUEHNY/AMEMBASSY OSLO PRIORITY 3924
RUEHOT/AMEMBASSY OTTAWA PRIORITY 1144
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 3009
RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI PRIORITY 7795
RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI PRIORITY 5454
RUEHON/AMCONSUL TORONTO PRIORITY 0268
RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEHLMC/MILLENNIUM CHALLENGE CORPORATION PRIORITY
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHDC PRIORITY
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA PRIORITY 2147
RHEHAAA/NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 000889

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DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/INS AND PM
MCC FOR D NASSIRY AND E BURKE

E.O. 12958: DECL: 06/21/2017
TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [PHUM](#) [MOPS](#) [CE](#)
SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: ACCESS TO TAMILNET RESTRICTED IN SRI
LANKA

Classified By: Ambassador Robert O. Blake, Jr., for reasons 1.4(b,d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: On June 19 TamilNet, a pro-Tamil website accused by the Government of posting propaganda for the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), was blocked by the major Internet Service Providers (ISPs) in Sri Lanka. TamilNet has accused the GSL of ordering ISPs to restrict access, a charge which Defense Spokesman Keheliya Rambukwella denied. On June 20, Sri Lanka's Free Media Movement released a statement strongly criticizing the GSL for restricting access to TamilNet and called for the ban to be lifted. Reuters told us that it received confirmation from an anonymous source within Sri Lanka's largest ISP, Dialogue, that Dialogue blocked TamilNet on orders from the Government. Embassy has observed that TamilNet is not accessible through Sri Lankan ISPs, but cannot confirm that the GSL is responsible for the problems. Despite the restriction, however, some Sri Lankans are accessing TamilNet through the use of web programs known as "anonymizers" that can be downloaded for free. On June 21, Ambassador spoke with Minister of Human Rights Mahinda Samarasinghe to urge that the GSL release its block on TamilNet. Samarasinghe pleaded ignorance on the matter but undertook to make some inquiries.
END SUMMARY.

TAMILNET ACCESS RESTRICTED

12. (SBU) During the evening hours of June 19, access to the TamilNet website was cut by major Sri Lankan ISPs, including Sri Lanka's two largest ISPs, Dialogue and Sri Lanka Telecom. TamilNet was founded on June 7, 1997, almost exactly ten years earlier, and is the most widely read pro-Tamil Internet content provider dedicated specifically to issues facing Sri Lanka. However, the GSL has often accused TamilNet of publishing pro-LTTE propaganda, a claim which TamilNet denies.

¶3. (SBU) Embassy has confirmed that TamilNet cannot be accessed through local Sri Lankan ISPs, such as those used by Embassy employees in their homes, although it can still be viewed from the Chancery since Internet access there is not dependent on local ISPs. Embassy interlocutors have told us that programs known as "anonymizers," popular in countries known for Internet censorship like China, can be downloaded for free to circumvent the block. Additionally, due to TamilNet's popularity, other Tamil oriented websites, like TamilCanadian, republish many articles that originate on TamilNet. To date, access to TamilCanadian and other Tamil web portals has not been restricted by local ISPs.

FREE MEDIA MOVEMENT SLAMS GOVERNMENT CENSORSHIP

¶4. (SBU) On June 20, Sri Lanka's Free Media Movement (FMM), a local non-governmental organization, issued a press release accusing the GSL of ordering ISPs to block access to TamilNet. The press release charged that the GSL's actions represented the first step down a "slippery slope of web and Internet censorship in Sri Lanka." Poloff spoke with FMM Director Sunanda Deshapriya, who stated that although he does not have proof that the GSL ordered local ISPs to block TamilNet, it would be an amazing coincidence if all Sri Lankan ISPs either experienced the same technical problems (that none have been able to resolve for the last two days) or independently but simultaneously decided to restrict access to TamilNet.

GSL DENIES ORDERING ISPs TO RESTRICT TAMILNET

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¶5. (C) Defense spokesman Keheliya Rambukwella denied that the Government ordered ISPs to restrict access to TamilNet, although he added that doing so was not a bad idea. However, on June 21, Poloff spoke with Simon Gardner, Reuters' Sri Lanka Bureau Chief, who said that he talked to an official at Sri Lanka's largest ISP, Dialogue, who acknowledged that Dialogue has blocked TamilNet on orders from the Government. Gardner said that Sri Lanka's other major ISP, Sri Lanka Telecom, was acting on similar orders from the Rajapaksa administration.

AMBASSADOR DISCUSSES MEDIA FREEDOM WITH SAMARASINGHE

¶6. (C) Ambassador talked with Minister of Human Rights Mahinda Samarasinghe on June 21 to inquire about GSL involvement in restricting access to TamilNet. Ambassador acknowledged that TamilNet is not unbiased in its reporting but stressed the importance of fostering a free media, even among the Government's critics. Ambassador encouraged Samarasinghe to investigate that matter and work to ensure that any deliberate block of TamilNet was eliminated. Samarasinghe pleaded ignorance on the matter but undertook to make some inquiries and pass along the U.S. message.

¶7. (C) COMMENT: TamilNet unquestionably has a pro-Tamil and usually pro-Tiger slant. However, TamilNet has published articles critical of the LTTE in the past. The site is often the only content provider to publish firsthand interviews with LTTE representatives, such as military spokesmen Irasiah Illanthirayan and political spokesman S.P. Thamichelvan. While TamilNet's articles are understood to have an anti-GSL bias, it is nevertheless a valuable source of information for the Embassy and has a large audience as an information source in the international community and the GSL. Even Defense Secretary Gothabaya Rajapaksa has told us he reads it every

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day. The blocking of TamilNet, if ordered by the Government, represents the latest GSL strategy to stifle Sri Lanka's

media.
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